

Gendered Genre: Women Detectives in World Literature

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In the past three decades, an entirely new subgenre of mystery fiction has evolved in which women wrote about women protagonists concerned with women's issues. It was a new voice that allowed woman's perspective to break through the rigidity of the traditional formula of the sub-genre, detective fiction. This mystery fiction became popular in 1977 with the publication of Marcia Muller's "Edwin of the Iron Shoes," the first of the Sharon McCone series. From then on, women writers increasingly entered the market with both amateur and professional women protagonists.

Mostly the women authors wrote about trends in modern American society that were not readily discussed openly, because they were not considered politically correct. In these writings they in fact challenged the expression of social power through their fictional representation of reality. The social ideologies raised in these works were independent of and separate from the conventional discourse in both literatures (literary and popular) and society. But they combined the elements of crime investigation, social ideology and feminine perspective in the popular fiction form. The women characters were allowed to feel, fantasize, or even act upon their desires without suffering any degradation in the eyes of the reader.

Contemporary fictional American amateur investigators not only have discovered the truth about murders and solving crimes, but they dealt with the demands of modern society. They projected the issues and reality of middle class America from where the authors mostly hailed. The plethora of issues raised in these novels reflected the pluralism of contemporary society.

Through their common detective fiction, they also explored the successful functioning of women in a specific society. Current Social issues such as illegal workers, child pornography, abusive husbands were the common themes handled by these authors and also touched upon the lives of women of the 21st century. These novels had an impact in real American life by providing more employment opportunities to many women as writers and opening up new markets in publishing and also changed the traditional formula of the popular detective novel.

Bethe Schoenfeld states that these authors wrote detective novels in the realist tradition and anchored crime in a specific location in a certain milieu and social strata (Schoenfeld, 2008). The women mystery authors spoke to their readers about events and circumstances that reflected the readers own lives in some way. The ideological issues that the mystery fiction touched upon was divorcing, which incorporated the emotional and financial side of divorce from a woman's perspective. The plot sometimes included the raising of children as a single parent – and the presence of domestic violence. Diana Molt Davidson's character 'Croidie Bear Schulz' whose violent ex-husband who was a medical doctor traditionally and ideologically believed to be a pillar of the society is a classic example. Such female protagonists gave a sense of empowerment to women readers thus enabling them for possible changes in society and social norms.

This new detective fiction also dealt with sexual activity, and focused on the solution to the crime and feminine awareness of social issues. A remarkable change noticed was that the characters were honest, about their own feelings. The openness allowed the women the freedom to explore their internal status in an effort to deal with the situation at hand. The amateur women sleuths were not afraid to show fear when they were in frightening situations. However they did not "lose their head" and stopped functioning,

as men often portrayed them. The female protagonists acknowledged their fear and also overcame it.

We can also see the absence of traditional nuclear families in these novels and therefore the diversity of issues centering a woman's place in family constructs, various aspects of marriage, single parenthood, including the issues of raising children, maternal relationships with their children and the adolescent development of their children.

Priscilla Walton and Manina Jones (Schoenfeld, 2008) expressed that the newly transformed detectives established the distinctive voice of an empowered female subject and it was not just a formal but a political gesture. Sally Munt further added that the heroines facilitated a politicised vision of women and the detectives resolved three unstable forms namely the individual, the family and the state. They believed that the reworking of these three pillars conferred upon liberal crime fiction a radical change. Sally Munt added that characters such as the professional detective V.I. Warshawski vocalized the liberal feminist idea of the liberated woman, who was equal to her male counterpart, however retained a strong femininity. It was felt that an educated female reader found issues in these novels close to her wish, though discussed in a fictional setting, but offered both a quick read and an intellectual challenge. This type of novels gave both the writers and the readers an immense interest in the ideological foundation and social contradictions which was as important as the solution to the crime.

Most of these women characters, were hailing from ordinary families, but suddenly found a profession to support themselves and their families financially. The fact that they were looking for a profession indicated that they were all middle class, as opposed to working class women who would probably look for a job. This is seen in Sheriff Joanna Brady's in one of J.A.

Jance's series. Joanna a thirty –one year –old widow who raises her eleven-year –old daughter alone in the American Society, trying to survive emotionally, professionally, and financially. She was an at-home- mom before her husband, a sheriff who was murdered. She decides to become the next sheriff and takes over his position after proper training and appointment. Her situation in raising her children as a single parent is focussed in this novel.

Some of the male writer's projected the figures of the female fatale as a much more complex creation and undermined them, and it was a product of male fantasy, desire and the will to dominate. This type of fiction focused attention on the male's need to control women's sexuality in order not to be overwhelmed by it.

Writers like Maria Kallio in the early nineties introduced feminist crime fiction to Finland with a strong female protagonist. The author very skillfully combines the description of everyday family life and the work of a police officer.

Women readers feel a sense of empowerment mostly through these female protagonists who brought possible changes in society and social norms. The traditional domestic ideology of marriage also saw a change through the characters. For example in Rita Mae Brown's novel 'Murder on the Prowl', Harry the post office person and amateur sleuth, tells her ex-husband, Fair, "I like living alone". "I like answering to no one but myself."(Schoenfeld, 2008). Usually the crime novels differed from the romance novels as the former was of a passive female saved by the strong male and about intimate relationship and sexual activity whereas the latter combined romance, murder mystery and science fiction. In the detective fiction, readers were not only interested with a 'whodunit' but an inquisitiveness to know why and a how.

To conclude these modern realist novels, focused on crime investigation, social ideologies and also feminine perspective in a popular fiction form.

Two important features observed in these modern detective novels were humor and use of honesty. All characters were honest, with themselves and their feelings which gave them the freedom to explore their internal status in an effort to deal with the situation at hand thereby giving them a sense of empowerment.

The reason for the popularity of these novels is that it gave insights into the existing problem and experiences of women in the society. This type of writing made the readers understand the difference between the real experience and perceived interpretation. It also made the readers understand that it is totally different projection unlike a man's perspective which always ignored the changes that a woman expects in her role in a modern society. Through these writings they highlighted the diverse avenues available for a woman in the society, which can be instrumental for their change and development.

Though the characters offer a female oriented perspective and feminine approach to investigation, they highlighted on social problems of the times in a distinctive way unlike the male writers. Apart from issues like divorce, parenthood, child trafficking, domestic violence, single parenthood, death of a spouse etc. It featured senior citizen crime fighters in reflection of matters of aging or second careers in one's life, sexual issues like homosexual relationships, and practical issues of employment etc. These novels were a realistic portrayal of twenty first century Women's lives on a daily basis, aimed at portraying the world at a particular time of history through the characters.

Work Cited

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